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ABSTRACT

What would a school that is responsive to the needs of girls look like? This paper presents findings of a study that sought to synthesize research and commentaries that develop, articulate, or use a feminist critique. It also attempted to identify a set of feminist thought and action to serve as building blocks of an alternative structure for schools and suggests how those principles might be played out in restructuring schools. The study conducted an analysis of secondary sources that included a comprehensive search strategy and a thorough review of the sources which contained feminist thought and/or applied feminist thought to education or inquiry. Six feminist themes emerged that are relevant to the organization of schools: freedom, service, community, change and transformation, convergence, and the celebration of contradiction. Each of the six themes is related to the three components of schools--organization, curriculum, and pedagogy. These themes, which might serve as the building blocks of a different kind of school organization, define a holistic, cohesive, and functional framework for a more responsive kind of school. (LMI)

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How Feminism Can Help Us Not Shortchange Girls

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How Feminism Can Help Us Not Shortchange Girls

Evidence has accumulated to support the contention that as a group, girls are not having positive school experiences. The American Association of University Women's report, How Schools Shortchange Girls, aggregated data to show how, overall, girls' school days are full of inequity and ineffectiveness in terms of options and aspirations. This report states that stereotypic roles for women have persisted in the form of textbooks, teaching behavior, counseling, teacher pay, and male dominated administration of schools. Concurrently, much attention has been given to imagining and designing new school structures. Practitioners, reformers, and researchers assert that different organizing and operating principles are needed to create schools that are responsive to children and youth.

However, most reform initiatives and most efforts to redesign schools are built on traditional assumptions about schools. Research about and practice in schools reflect broadly-held beliefs about the social, political, organizational, and individual dimensions of schools. For girls, this is particularly troublesome. Societal norms, political priorities, bureaucratic and impersonal organizational structures, and lack of understanding and attention to the patterns of growth and development of girls and women are all played out in ways that reduce the excitement and vitality of learning experiences provided for girls. What would a school responsive to the needs of girls look like?

Perspectives

Feminist scholars, researchers, practitioners, and activists challenge dominant beliefs with open, encompassing alternatives that specifically address the position of women in society. While feminist thought and analyses include a variety of different, sometimes even competing perspectives, this study was designed on the premise that generating a set of feminist themes could make a feminist critique more accessible to educators and expand the options that might be considered in

restructuring schools. Specifically, what would a school look like if it were based on the principles of a feminist critique?

Objectives

The purposes of this study were to (1) synthesize research and commentaries that develop, articulate, or use a feminist critique; (2) identify a set of principles of feminist thought and action that could serve as the building blocks of an alternative structure for schools; and (3) suggest how those principles might be played out in restructuring schools.

Research Methods

Secondary source analysis was the primary research methods used in this study. A comprehensive search strategy, including a thorough use of the ERIC data base, was designed to identify manuscripts, articles, chapters, books, and other material that synthesized information about feminist thought and/or applied feminist thought to education or inquiry. The sources reviewed included: (1) theoretical feminist writings (e.g., Lather, Harding); (2) applications of a feminist critique to education or related areas (e.g., Fine, Gilligan, Weiler); and, (3) comprehensive overviews of feminism (e.g., Tong).

We read each carefully and noted specific ideas and principles. Summaries of this content analysis were reviewed for identification of categories and perspectives which were broad enough to encapsulate major feminist themes. These themes were presented formally to colleagues in a variety of settings, followed by in-depth discussion and criticism. The resulting analysis yielded a set of themes that are both significant and relevant to the organization of schools.

Findings and Conclusions

This study led to two sets of conclusions. First, six themes emerged from this analysis which represent values, beliefs, or assumptions within different philosophical traditions. The meaning of each theme is enriched and expanded by

incorporating as many perspectives as possible. The second analytic step is to demonstrate how these themes might be used as the building blocks of a restructured school.

Feminist Principles as an Alternative Perspective on Schooling

Alternative perspectives on the organization of schools challenge traditional perspectives: (1) that institutions play a neutral role in the maintenance of social structure and (2) that authority patterns within organizational systems are natural. In fact, Weber writes that organizations would not function ideally if they did not have hierarchy. Alternative perspectives which contrast with more traditional perspectives assert that (1) people actively construct their own worlds, (2) knowledge and power within organizations are intimately interrelated, (3) understanding facts and constructing meaning always involves a social, value-laden process, and (4) traditional elements (e.g., bureaucracy, hierarchy) conceal as much as they reveal about organizational life experiences (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, Fernandez, 1994).

Feminism is one alternative perspective that holds promise for seeing organizations differently and, consequently, for constructing them differently. Why would an alternative theory such as feminism hold any promise for expanding our thinking about schools. Scott (1990) suggests that:

> We need theory [here, post-structuralist] that will let us think in terms of pluralities and diversities rather than of unities and universals. We need theory that will break the conceptual hold, at least, of those long traditions of (Western) philosophy that have systematically and repeatedly construed the world hierarchically in terms of masculine universals and feminine specificities. We need theory that will enable us to articulate alternative ways of thinking about (and thus acting upon) gender without either simply reversing the old hierarchies or confirming them. And we need theory that will be useful and relevant for political practice" (Hirsch & Keller, p. 134)

Scott implies that our main focus should not be on the label of "feminist" per se but rather on the production of alternative whole images. Harding concurs, in saying that "the issue here is not so much one of the right to claim a label as it is of the

prerequisites for producing less partial and distorted descriptions, explanations and understandings" (Harding, 1987, p. 12).

Feminism as an idea or movement has gone through a number of stages – from focusing on commonalities or common experiences of women to focusing on the meaning of difference (among ourselves and between us and others) – and by its nature will continue to evolve. Since feminism has evolved in this way, we can return to inquiry about commonalities without the risk of oversimplification because now feminism understands that difference does not mean opposition. At the same time, however, this paper will not try to create a kind of mega-feminism, or an explanatory conceptual framework that is a tightly constructed, multi-faceted organizer. We do not want to describe a feminist school as one that does not have from for competing perspectives. Instead, we draw from a wide array of feminist thought and incorporate what appears to us to be more widely accepted underlying values that might help us think about schools from a feminist perspective.

Feminist and feminist theory represents a long, complex, and often contradictory tradition of inquiry, social action, philosophy, and epistemology. Each of the following themes represent values, beliefs, or assumptions within the different philosophical traditions. The meaning of each theme becomes enriched and expanded by incorporating as many perspectives as possible. For example, freedom is a theme; freedom has different meanings from post-structuralist, pragmatist, radical humanist, etc. perspectives. Each of the following sections will attempt a relatively comprehensive description, but keep a diverse (and sometimes dissident) audience in mind. Finally, this framework for reframing the organization of schools is tentative, exploratory, and developmental.

Themes of a Feminist Critique

Six themes emerged from our study: freedom, service, community, change and transformation, convergence, and celebrating contradiction.

Freedom. Freedom is generally defined as the absence of domination and control that limits individual actualization and self-definition. Liberal feminists argue that societal institutions must be free from mechanisms of domination and control allowing freedom from oppressive roles (Tong, 1989). Further they wish to eliminate impediments (i.e., legal, economic, etc.) to women's progress. Radical feminists believe that there is a need to reframe how men and women think about women's bodies. In their perspective, female sexuality is constructed in terms of men's needs and control strategies reflect male control of women's bodies (Tong, 1989).

Another feminist belief is that self-definition is the key to individual and group empowerment. For example, Collins (1990) states that:

> Using an epistemology that cedes the power of self definition to other groups, no matter how well meaning, in essence perpetuates Black women's subordination." (p. 34)

The theme of freedom seems an obvious starting point for a feminist school.

Service. Service means contribution either in terms of individual purpose in the public interest or in terms of life works. Work is important for the individual and for the community -- and this means *all* of our work (at home, in our profession, in the community). Service includes political action.

Marxist feminists' beliefs about women are intertwined with their beliefs about work and class. The effects of a capitalist society get carried over to other dimensions of society, e.g., family, religion. Socialist feminists also focus on women and work. The critique has two dimensions -- dual systems theory argues against both patriarchy and capitalism; unifies systems theory focuses on the alienation of workers (Tong, 1989). In a very basic and fundamental way, service can be explained as "the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time" (Edelman, 1992, p. 6).

Community. Community implies the linkages between the individual and communities and linkages with others; and, it is the individual as a member of the community. Most feminist theories espouse feminism as about an affirmation of women's community and individual actualization and potential. For example:

> What lesbianism and feminism share is an affirmation of women's community and a desire to see each woman actualize her capacities to like, feel affection for, and lover other women. An insistence on strong relationships between and among women is what puts lesbians and feminists in alliance against the fathers. (Tong, 1989, p. 123)

An ethos of general and genuine care and concern for others is also important. For example, Weiler (1988) notes the goals of feminist teachers are humane, implying care and concern for their students as human beings. These teachers explain that they try to redefine useful knowledge by expanding the limits of students' thinking and they use specific instructional strategies to challenge conventional roles and expectations. They adopt a critical pedagogy -- influenced by socialist feminism. Feminist teachers see the connection between women's schooling and women's work.

Change and transformation. Change and transformation means evolution and constant development and redevelopment of the individual and social institutions. This theme also implies political action. Understanding the meaning of this theme is a bit more complex because it relies on language and deconstruction as a focus and too of change.

The definitions of feminism vary widely from "feminism is about women" to "feminism should be a more daring idea -- an act of political resistance for larger groups of women" (Childers and Hooks, 1990). This political resistance has to do with change and transformation. For instance, existentialist feminism focuses on three dimensions: (1) women as other in an ontological way; (2) myths about women constructed by men; (3) women's acceptance of social roles (Tong, 1989). The argument for change arises from Dubouvoir's argument that women need to go to

work, become intellectuals, and work toward socialist transformation of society in order to actualize feminist (Tong).

Language (its uses and abuses) is important because it so often constrains the imagination of alternatives – since it reflects dominant perspectives. For example, Bell Hooks (in Collins, 1990, p. 35) says feminist should state, "I advocate feminism", because such an approach could serve as a way women who are concerned about feminist as well as other political movements could express their support while avoiding linguistic structures that give primacy to one particular group. Deconstructionist feminists note the difficulty in using our language since it is difficult to get freedom of oppression from an oppressive language. Also, feminism is ever-changing because it is important to escape the "phallogocentric drive to stabilize, organize, and rationalize our conceptual universe" (Tong, 1989, p. 223).

Celebrating contradiction. This theme has to do both with difference as a challenge to fixed identities and with binary realities rather than opposing entities. Childers and Hooks (1990) state that we celebrate the existence of contradictions because they mean we are in the process of change and transformation.

"The hidden benefit of finding bonding at the same time as conflict is the prevention of the development of problems of merging and expectations of sameness that so many women have seen backfiring in the feminist movement (Childers and Hooks (1990). Differences are not binary; they do not represent fixed oppositions. But, if differences are not binary, what are they? Perhaps they can be explained as: "the condition of individual and collective identities, differences as constant challenge to the fixing of those identities, history as the repeated illustration of the play of differences, differences as the very meaning of equality itself" (Childers and Hooks, 1990, p. 144). Feminist refuses to construct one explanatory theory and say that the condition of otherness allows women to step back and critique what's happening. Openness, diversity, and plurality are critical dimensions. As Tong

(1989) states, "feminist thought permits women to think her own thoughts. Apparently, not the truth, but truths are setting women free" (p. 283).

The other aspect of this principle has to do with the realities that women combine in everyday life. For example, women who work and are mothers/wives/homemakers are interdependent and autonomous and combine separation and connection. Another example is the observation of Gilligan, Lyons, and Hamner (1990) that choices made by young women represent an interdependent and autonomous mode of decision making and consider both self and others. Other realities that might be combined are privilege and lack of privilege, pluralities and diversity. In terms of privilege and women's experience" "feminists need to recognize that naming yourself as privileged is not to name yourself as oppressive or dominating because we have choices as to how we exercise privilege" (Childers and Hooks, 1990, p. 75). Further "the most exciting political and theoretical implication of expanding the category of gender so that it gives expression to reality -- of the ways race and class converge -- is that understanding this link has the potential to give us the base to begin to work towards an inclusive feminist movement" (Childers and Hooks, 1990, p. 80).

Convergence. The sixth theme is convergence, which means bringing together public and private concerns. It is a process that supports difference and adds holistic perspective. For example, women might say that they do not lead fractured lives, but life, which includes working and mothering and many other things.

This theme builds on celebrating contradiction by highlighting that separation and connection are not in opposition but, rather, are two compatible aspects. Gilligan, Lyons, and Hamner (1990) note that feminism deals with the convergence of public and private concerns. For instance, in their study of Emma Willard high school, they found that listening is an issue in the public realm and

fairness is an issue in the private realm of relationships. Listening and fairness are seen as intimately related concepts. But, "there is a tension between the power of institutions, which have been created under particular historical, economic, and social conditions, and the will of individuals, who may be in opposition to those forces, and who themselves can influence the present structure of institutions" (Weiler, 1988, p. 147).

Feminist Themes as Building Blocks of a School

In this section we will work through each of the above themes in relation to three components of schooling: organization, curriculum, and pedagogy. The organization of schools refers to the structure and the relations among and between teachers, administrators, students, and the community-at-large. The curriculum refers broadly to the course of study. Pedagogy refers to the beliefs contained in the curriculum and the organization that can contribute to a successful school build on these six feminist themes.

Freedom. If freedom were a central building block of a school based on feminist themes, relationships and roles would be non-hierarchical, decreasing domination and control. School structure would be changed to diffuse power and authority among staff. The people in the school would accept collective responsibility for individual action. The curriculum would be developmental and personalized. The course of study might emerge as the student progressed, taking into consideration their interests, strengths, and goals. The pedagogy of this feminist school would promote individual and group self-definition.

Service. If service were a central building block of a school based on feminist themes, teacher work would be reframed as professional service entailing respect and responsibility. Teachers and students would be assumed to enjoy their jobs and given credit for their personal initiative in work. There would be a link to the community in terms of perceptions of the school's service and how the community

can contribute. The curriculum would encourage a sense of student responsibility and an understanding of the importance of being "of service" to others.

Community. If community were a central building block of a school based on feminist themes, linkages would be created between and among teachers, administrators, students, and the general public. The larger community would be included in school activities and programs would be developed to integrate students and teachers into the community. The school would be available as a facility for adult community events during off-hours. School building would be community centers ready and available to respond to the needs of youth. Curriculum and pedagogy would create a deep sense of multiculturalism, or respect and caring and appreciation for others' differences.

Change and transformation. If change and transformation were a central building block of a school built on feminist themes, all participants in the school would understand and appreciate that the school is in a constant state of evolution. Opportunities would be provided for teachers and administrators and students to reflect on their work, to regroup and redefine and rework the structures and processes of the schools so that they are in tune with changing needs of the people who populate the school.

Celebrating Contradiction. In celebrating contradiction, everyone -- teachers, administrators, support staff, students, parents -- would be recognized and appreciated for their differences and their contributions to the diversity of the school. All individuals would be seen as bringing their "truth" or reality to the setting. Instead of looking for sameness across teachers or students, one would expect and respect diversity and build a community sensitive, respectful and tolerant of differences -- in ability, beliefs, experiences, background, etc. The curriculum would include conversations about differences and press for real understanding. A sense of understanding, recognition, acceptance, respect would be generated

through a community of learning. Connection and separation, interdependence and autonomy would not be seen as contradictory, but as important contributions to the wholeness of the community. Students would understand that they are interdependent in the process of learning and developing and, at the same time, maintain a sense of independence and individual growth through solitary learning and self-reflection.

Convergence. Convergence is making fractured lives whole. For example, pregnant mothers in the school would be provided parenting support. The conflicts that emerge in the responsibilities of the private and professional lives of teachers would be recognized. Time would be available for routine personal business. The school community would be accommodating in recognition of the need to attend to family and other personal responsibilities.

Conclusion

The definitions of feminist themes that might be the building blocks of a different kind of school organization are interrelated. They define a holistic, life-affirming, cohesive, functional, and sensible framework for a school. We believe they hold real promise for a more responsive kind of schooling. Imagine you are Samantha, a seventh grader:

In the morning on the bus to school, you converse with both boys and girls in a relaxed, fun manner. Your school day begins with math, which you really like and do well in. You raise your hand repeatedly, are called on often, and enjoy speaking in class. If you answer incorrectly, no one remarks negatively but rather the teacher and classmates help you figure out how to do the problem. You have also become involved in math in other areas of schooling including a math club. Next it is on to English; currently you are reading Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. The curriculum for this class includes books from authors of different race, ethnicity, and gender, and explore different cultures. The teacher in this class

often assigns group learning tasks, which you find fun to do. In science, your teacher refers to you and your girl friend's frog dissection as exemplary and encourages you both to continue the good work. Sometimes you tell stories of experiences related to science from home and your teacher always encourages you to learn from these occurrences. Your health education class on reproductive systems is co-ed and has used open discussions to foster understanding. When you get to physical education class, you are full of energy and play football with boys and girls enthusiastically. After school you are involved in a number of clubs, sports, and organizations that are supportive of your many interests and allow for you to develop strong relationships with adults in the school and even provide service to others. By the time the bus comes to pick you up, you are tired but eager to do your homework since all of the subjects interest you and are relevant to your life and your goals. The future is full of possibilities!

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